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ABSTRACT

Nationwide, the shortage of special education teachers is expected to grow, fueled by expanding demand and high teacher attrition rates. The situation in Texas mirrors that of the nation. A needs assessment conducted by Abilene Christian University (ACU) in west central Texas found: a continuing need for special education teachers in the area; teacher training needs related to the unique aspects of rural schools, inclusive collaborative settings, the use of technology as an instructional tool, and bilingual and multicultural settings; and the need for a system of professional support. To meet these needs, ACU developed Project PRIME (Preparing, Recruiting, and Retaining Teachers for Inclusive Multicultural Environments). Project components and their activities are: (1) retention of special education teachers (a manual covering topics and common problems in special education, peer support groups, a newsletter for ongoing communication, and a resource center); (2) recruitment of prospective education majors (a recruitment video, a student financial aid manual, faculty visits to area high schools, and meetings with community leaders to discuss recruitment of local minority high school students); (3) preparation (improvement of special education teacher education in the areas of inclusion, technology, diversity, and collaboration); and (4) data collection and analysis (project participation in a statewide effort to track, predict, and analyze teacher shortages). An appendix lists 31 additional recruitment and retention activities. (Contains 10 references.) (SV)

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PREPARING, RECRUITING, AND RETAINING SPECIAL EDUCATION PERSONNEL IN RURAL AREAS

Introduction

As we enter a new century one of the many challenges facing our nation's schools will be to attract and keep quality special education teachers. The need for special education teachers is on the rise and that need will extend far into the next century. By the year 2000, schools in the United States will educate nearly 3 million more children than they do today (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999). Many of these children will have special education needs that will require the services of highly trained, well-qualified special education teachers. Nationally there is a considerable shortage of special education teachers (American Association for Employment in Education, 1998), a shortage that promises to continue well into the next century.

Special Education Teacher Shortages

In school systems throughout the United States the lack of adequately trained and certificated personnel has been, and continues to be, a formidable barrier to providing appropriate educational services to students with disabilities. This has been a perpetual problem for the last several decades. Approximately 29,102 special education teachers were needed but unavailable during 1990 to replace uncertificated staff and to fill vacancies (Fourteenth Annual Report to Congress, 1991). Krause (1993) reported that, nationally, about 26,000 special education jobs were vacant without qualified staff to fill them. In 1996, 335,035 vacancies were reported in special education, with the greatest number in learning disabilities, mental retardation, and cross categorical areas (Eighteenth Annual Report to Congress). The Nineteenth Annual Report to Congress (1997) reported that 26,206 special education teachers nationwide were not fully certified.

Not only is there a shortage of special education personnel, but many currently working in the field are leaving in alarming numbers. Gallagher (1993) reported on the tremendous attrition in the field of special education. This has been echoed by other writers (NASDSE, 1993; Schnoor and Brady, 1994; Lemke, 1995). Brownell, Smith, and Miller (1995) called teacher attrition one of the most difficult challenges facing special education, with special educators much more likely to leave the classroom than regular educators. Wald (1997) reported that the factors related to special education teacher attrition include role overload, lack of autonomy, and role conflicts.

At the same time, as the supply of qualified personnel has been shrinking, the demand for special education teachers has been growing almost exponentially (Cooley and Yovanoff, 1995). Silvestri (1995) has estimated that the demand for special education teachers will increase from 338,000 in 1994 to at least 545,000 in 2005, with a possibility of as many as 648,000 teachers needed. These facts have staggering implications for the recruitment, training and retention of special education personnel. But, even more importantly, they threaten to severely impair the provision of appropriate educational services to children and youth with disabilities.

Statewide

The situation in Texas mirrors that of the rest of the nation. The American Association for Employment in Education (1998) reported that the teaching fields of mentally handicapped, multiple handicapped, behavior disordered, learning disabled, physically handicapped, and visually handicapped are fields with very high shortages in Texas. Three of those areas (learning disabilities, physically handicapped, and visually handicapped) comprise three of the top four areas of critical teacher shortages in the state. The State Board for Educator

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Certification (1998) reported that, for the 1996-97 school year, 18.9% of the special education teachers teaching in Texas schools were not fully certified for their assignment. The highest percentage of non-certified teachers in special education (35.8) were in rural school districts.

And, not only is there a continuing need for special education teachers, but there is a need for teachers appropriately trained in, and equipped with, the skills that special education teachers are going to need in the new century. As our student population becomes more diverse, as we move toward more inclusive schools, as the public pressure for accountability escalates, as the challenges and opportunities of technology multiply, we must prepare special education teachers who are capable of being successful in the schools of tomorrow.

A recent study conducted by the Department of Education at Abilene Christian University (1998) examined the types of skills needed by teachers in the coming decade. Data were collected from personnel officials in over three hundred school districts in Texas. The ability to work with diverse populations was one of the most important characteristics identified, with skills in technology also a high priority.

The geographic area primarily served by Abilene Christian University and the Big Country Center for the Professional Development of Teachers also has a strong need for appropriately trained special education teachers. Our local Alternative Certification Program, operated by Region XIV Education Service Center, has been diligent and successful in producing many teachers to address these shortages. However, a need still exists for additional teachers.

As part of a needs assessment process, a survey, followed up with a structured interview, was conducted by Abilene Christian University's Department of Education. Involved were representatives from school districts, universities, and the regional education agency in west central Texas. The interview consisted of questions regarding the perceived shortage of special education teachers in west central Texas and the type of preparation needed by such teachers.

Again, the critical shortage of special education teachers was emphasized, along with the need for such teachers to be trained to work in collaborative, inclusive settings and to be able to teach students from diverse language and cultural backgrounds. Responses also indicated a great deal of frustration on the part of special education teachers, with many contemplating leaving the field. Problems involved in retaining special education teachers included a perceived lack of administrative support, burnout, professional isolation, frustration with paperwork, and a lack of specific training in effective practices.

Another part of the needs assessment process involved the collection of data from regular education teachers, special education teachers, and principals in elementary and secondary schools in west central Texas. The study sought to determine the types of preparation needed by special education teachers in today's classrooms. Skills in collaboration, communication, technology, and effective strategies were noted as being important.

In addition, data was collected from career placement offices at universities in west central Texas. Data indicated many more requests for special education teachers than local colleges and universities are producing, even with the aid of alternative certification routes.

As a result of the information described above the following needs were identified in west central Texas:

1. There is a continuing need for special education teachers, especially in rural areas of west central Texas;
2. There is a need for training special education teachers in the unique aspects of teaching in rural schools;
3. Special education teachers must be prepared to work in inclusive, collaborative settings;
4. Special education teachers must be trained to use technology as an instructional tool;
5. Technology and other distance learning approaches should be utilized as a vehicle to make preservice preparation of special education teachers flexible and accessible;

6. Special education teachers must be selected and trained to teach in diverse, bilingual and multicultural settings;
7. A system of professional support must be developed and implemented for practicing special education teachers.

Project PRIME

Project PRIME (Preparing, Recruiting, and Retaining Teachers for Inclusive, Multicultural Environments) was born out of the rich literature on the problems of attracting and retaining quality teachers. We believe that recruiting teachers in special education, and then retaining those teachers in the field, requires solutions that are long term, flexible, responsive, comprehensive, and integrated. Project PRIME is a project funded by the State Board of Educator Certification to increase the number of well-prepared special education teachers. The grant was awarded to Abilene Christian University on behalf of the Big Country Center for the Professional Development of Teachers.

Project PRIME is based on a model proposed by Whitworth (1994). The essential elements of this model are:

- **Data Driven:** Data collection and analysis shapes and drives the system.
- **Permanent:** Personnel shortages in special education require long-term solutions.
- **Flexible:** The system will require frequent changes in the types of techniques/strategies needed and the available resources.
- **Responsive:** A successful system must respond quickly and effectively.
- **Comprehensive:** A good system should address every factor and issue impacting personnel retention and include all significant stockholders during its development and implementation.
- **Integrated:** The system should be structured in such a way that each part supports and complements the others.

Project PRIME, as illustrated by the model below, incorporates four components designed to address the element described above. These components are (1) Data Collection and analysis, (2) Marketing and Recruitment, (3) Support and Enhancement, (4) Professional Preparation.



Because Project PRIME utilizes each of these components and elements it has been a very comprehensive undertaking. Various activities have been conducted with each of the model's four components. A brief summary of the activities developed and implemented under each of the model's components is provided.

Retention

Project PRIME's retention component consisted of several activities. The project coordinator and project director wrote and compiled a manual for use as a retention tool for special education teachers. The contents were based upon the reported needs of special education teachers and included current topics such as collaboration, managing and implementing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and a discussion of solutions to common problems among special educators. The manual also includes a wide variety of web sites for special education teachers, information for contacting State resources, as well as national organizations for teachers and families of students with disabilities.

Project PRIME also established a peer support group by bringing together a core group of teachers to discuss their problems and concerns and to brainstorm solutions to those issues. As a result of these discussions, project staff developed a stress workshop and workshop manual specifically designed for special education teachers.

We met with beginning special education teachers in an effort to determine their needs and assisted them in accessing needed resources on topics such as whole language and discipline. One outgrowth of this meeting was a newsletter developed and disseminated to area special educators. The newsletter's purpose was to encourage and provide a vehicle for ongoing communication among area special educators and to inform special education teachers of resources and supports and activities available in the area to assist them in teaching students with special needs.

Finally, the project staff established a dissemination center of professional books, journals, videos, and children's literature. This resource center is available to any special education teacher who wishes to use it.

Recruitment

Throughout the year, the project staff also engaged in a variety of recruitment activities. We produced a professional video which highlights some of the rewarding elements of teaching in special education. The video emphasizes areas such as variety, challenge, and excitement. Copies of the video may be obtained from Abilene Christian University's Department of Education at (915) 674-2112.

Project staff also compiled a manual for university students interested in seeking financial aid. Financial assistance is available to a variety of students seeking careers in special education. This manual is designed to ease the process of searching for local, state, and federal dollars.

Faculty and graduate students visited a number of area high schools where they spoke to over 300 high school students-not only about the awareness of people with disabilities, but also about the possibility of choosing a career in special education. Many of the students with whom we spoke, reported that they would consider a career in special education as the result of the presentation.

A series of lunch meetings was also initiated with local leaders of the African-American and Hispanic communities. The purpose of these meetings was to initiate a dialogue regarding ways to encourage and support minority high school students in pursuing careers in special education. As a result of these meetings several activities were planned and implemented to bring local minority high school students to campus and to provide resources, such as the financial aid manual, to assist them in them in enrolling in college. An important outgrowth

of this activity was closer and more collaborative relationship between the university and the local minority community.

Preparation

Project PRIME implemented a number of activities to improve the preparation of special education teachers. Project PRIME was designed to improve special education teacher preparation across several dimensions reflecting the changing role of special education teachers: Inclusion, Technology, Diversity, and Collaboration.

Meetings were held with representatives of teacher preparation programs in the area including McMurry, Hardin-Simmons and Howard Payne universities, and the Alternative Certification Program at Region 14 Education Service Center. These meetings focused on trying to establish collaboration and coordination among all providers of preparation to prospective special education teachers. Using the manual *What Every Special Educator Must Know: The International Standards for the Preparation of Special Education Teachers* (Council for Exceptional Children, 1996), every course and preparation activity provided by each entity was examined and discussed. The result was a revised sequence of courses, requirements and experiences for special education teachers to reflect current needs of practicing special educators.

Various consultants were also brought to campus to discuss ways that courses could be revised to reflect better preparation in diversity and multicultural issues. Consultants presented campus-wide workshops and also engaged in small group discussions with faculty members. As a result of these discussions changes were made in existing courses and a dialogue created for changes and additions to programs and activities that would improve prospective teachers' ability to teach in multicultural settings.

Existing special education courses were also revised to reflect more of an emphasis on technology and on merging regular and special education. Course objectives and requirements were changed to emphasize these issues, and appropriate presenters and activities integrated into classes.

To further highlight the use of technology and to provide more flexible preparation options, two special education courses were redesigned into an Internet-based format. This makes it possible for students to take two of the special education classes offered by ACU over the Internet. The format is interactive, allows for customization based on student needs and background, and provides for exams to be taken on-line.

Data Collection and Analysis

Fundamental to any effective personnel recruitment and retention system is information. It is the foundation upon which the system rests. Before appropriate strategies and activities for recruiting, preparing and retaining special education teachers can be developed and implemented it is essential that they be based on reliable data regarding what is needed and what is likely to work. Then, as the model is implemented, data will assist in insuring that strategies and activities are effective and continue to produce the desired results. A reliable system of data collection and analysis shapes, drives, and guides the process of personnel recruitment and retention. Among the types of data needed are;

- The discrepancy between supply and demand of special education staff,
- The amount of shortages by personnel category,
- The number of special education staff being prepared by various entities,
- The number of special education teachers leaving the field,
- The reasons why special educators leave the field,
- The effectiveness of special educators in the jobs for which they are employed,
- The satisfaction of special educators with their preparation,

- The extent to which the educational needs of students with disabilities are being met,
- Results regarding the effectiveness of various types of strategies and techniques for personnel recruitment and retention.
- There must be a mechanism in place and operating to collect this information, analyze it, and provide it in an understandable format to those who will be using it to plan activities and strategies.

In order to meet the requirements of this component of the Project our efforts were combined with those of a statewide project funded by the Texas Education Agency and coordinated by Region 4 Education Service Center in Houston. This project was designed to create a statewide system for tracking, predicting, and analyzing the special education personnel needs in the state and then for providing that information in a format that can be disseminated and utilized by school districts and personnel preparation programs in the state. The director of Project PRIME served as a member of the statewide task force that met periodically over a six-month period to develop the instruments and procedures for this data collection and analysis process. For more information regarding this contact the Special Education Department at Region 4 ESC.

Related Activities

A number of related activities have also been implemented and continued as a result of this project. A website regarding the project and providing resources and a forum for practicing and prospective special educators has been developed and is being maintained. The site can be accessed at <http://www.acu.edu/academics/education/prime/index.htm>

Project staff also have joined forces with the ACU Multicultural Enrichment Committee. This group continues to explore and develop activities and programs to make the ACU campus more diverse, to increase the awareness and understanding of both students and faculty regarding multicultural issues, to improve the success of students from minority cultures, and to increase faculty members ability to prepare students for a multicultural society.

Although funding for the project has officially ended a number of activities are planned to continue. These include:

- Meeting with preparation entities to continue collaboration and coordination of programs
- Meetings with area special education teachers to determine needs and create a dialogue for solutions to retention, stress, and burnout.
- Pursue the establishment of a local chapter of the Council for Exceptional Children
- Continuation of a local newsletter for special education teachers
- Maintenance and dissemination of resources to area special educators
- Marketing of the video and manuals to prospective special education teachers.

In addition, a number of other activities have been compiled as possibilities to address the issues related to the recruitment, preparation, and retention of quality special educators to teach our students with special needs. These can be seen in the attached Appendix.

APPENDIX

Additional Activities to Assist in Recruiting, Preparing and Retaining Special Education Teachers

Recruitment

- 1) The development and distribution of videotapes, brochures and other informational and promotional items (posters, etc.) on special education as a profession. These items will be distributed to high school counselors, community colleges, and career and vocational placement offices.

- 2) A Speakers' Bureau to address high school and college students. Special education teachers, support personnel, representatives of various service providers, and parents of children with disabilities will be recruited for the speakers bureau.
- 3) A media campaign directed to specific geographic areas and to specific groups (i.e. displaced homemakers, bilingual, etc.).
- 4) Creative promotional programs designed to stimulate interest in special education professions. For instance, programs on disability awareness developed for presentation to area middle school and high schools with an emphasis on special education as a career option. It is important to contact youth early because research indicates that young people make career decisions and develop self-concepts as workers early in life (Szymannske, Turner, and Hershenson, 1992).
- 5) Presentations at state conferences/conventions, etc. (i.e. Future Educators Association, etc.). Formal presentations, as well as displays, booths, etc. provided to local, regional and statewide meetings of student groups, career fairs, and other appropriate groups. For example, a local non-profit organization sponsors a large and very popular education and health fair every year that attracts parents and students from throughout the area. A booth on special education teaching could be developed and set up at this fair.
- 6) A student ambassadorship program that involves university students majoring in special education returning to their former high schools to speak to students about special education teaching as a career.
- 7) The establishment of tutoring programs at middle schools and high schools to acquaint students with the satisfaction and possibilities of working with individuals with disabilities.
- 8) Activities to locate potential candidates for special education teaching from other job positions, such as teacher assistant, custodian, volunteer service provider, and parents of children with disabilities.
- 9) The development of scholarships and other incentives to select special education as a career option.
- 10) Building on the Minority Teacher Identification and Enrichment Program described by Banks (1996), a mentor-mentee program could be implemented for prospective minority special education teachers. Prospective teachers would be identified and linked with mentors who are special education teachers of color. Mentors would assist mentees by providing educational programs and activities designed to improve their literacy and mathematics skills, and would help increase their awareness and understanding of the special education profession. In addition, they would share information on financial and academic support resources available. Meetings would be established on a regular basis for mentors and mentees. Training for the mentors would be provided and a handbook developed describing the training, as well as expectations, recommended activities, and available resources.
- 11) A second aspect of the above program would be summer programs to capitalize on the mentoring process. During this program, students would attend classes designed to enhance their basic academic, study and social skills. Students would also participate in panel discussions and interact with other teacher education majors. University professors, counselors, mentors, and other practicing teachers would assist in the implementation of the summer program.
- 12) Once prospective minority special education teachers enter the preservice program, specific activities could be developed to support their academic, social, and cultural needs and enhance their success as students. Faculty members and upperclass students of color would serve as mentors and advisors. Other resources at Abilene Christian University such as Academic Advance, the Learning Enhancement Center, Upward Bound,

and the Student Success program could be used to create a network of support for the student. Rather than wait until a problem develops, this support system would be proactive, meeting with students on a regular basis so that assistance and resources can be provided as quickly as possible.

- 13) A program could be developed to assist minority teacher education candidates with required standardized tests, specifically the TASP and the ExCET. Data would be analyzed to determine areas of most frequent difficulty and those areas targeted. Existing university resources would be organized and accessed to provide assistance according to the needs of the individual student. This would include instruction and practice on test-taking strategies, assistance on improving math, reading, or writing skills, and remediation in specific content.
- 14) Each One Reach One (Prater and Obiakor, 1991, 1992) is a program that could be adapted and incorporated into Project PRIME's Marketing and Recruitment Component. This program was developed through a grant funded by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission to provide financial support, nurturing, and encouragement to increase the number of minority male teachers in elementary classrooms through recruitment, retention and placement.

Retention

- 1) A Teacher-Helping-Teacher network where special education teachers with similar instructional interests and assignments can meet to share ideas and resources;
- 2) A Resource Bank of college and university faculty members to address specific issues, topics or problems;
- 3) A faculty exchange program with local colleges and universities;
- 4) A staff exchange program where school district staff exchange jobs with staff in other types of positions within the district;
- 5) A mentorship program for new special education teachers;
- 6) Continuing education programs consisting of workshops and seminars on specific topics as identified through the needs assessment process;
- 7) A network of model classrooms where special education teachers can see innovative and effective techniques and practices demonstrated;
- 8) Videotaping effective teaching techniques of local teachers for use during inservice and staff sessions;
- 9) Training to building principals to better support special education personnel;
- 10) Easy access to needed training using technology;
- 11) Minigrant programs for teacher designed projects;
- 12) Disseminate information on local, regional, state, and national sources of funding for classroom projects;
- 13) Access to staff development resources such as books, journals, and videotapes;
- 14) Orientation programs for new teachers;

- 15) A Community Friends program to assist new teachers in locating and orienting to the community;
- 16) The involvement of local business and community leaders in working with special education staff to provide resources and assist with funding staff development activities;
- 17) Induction programs for new teachers with continued professional development peer teaching, and an emphasis on assistance rather than evaluation.

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